

ABNER P. DIZON

Common Denominators in Presenting the Gospel in Asia

The continent of Asia comprises only 23.5% of the world's surface, yet its population constitutes nearly 61% of the world (*Operation World* 2011). This region is important not only because it gave birth to all the world's major religions, but also because Asia is where one finds "significant groups of all the world's major religions" such as, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and Judaism (Prescott 2000:421). These cultural-religious groups make Asia a very diverse region consisting "not just one world but many worlds—sometimes intersecting, sometimes colliding, sometimes merging into each other" (421).

Asia caught the world's attention in the 1980s and 1990s due to its amazing economic growth. Trend-watcher John Naisbitt reported in 1996 that the World Bank remarked that "nowhere and at no time in human history has humanity achieved such economic progress" as what was happening in Asia (Prescott 421). Naisbitt went on to predict that "as we move toward the year 2000 . . . Asia will become the dominant region of the world: economically, politically and culturally" (422). That did not happen because in July 1997, the Asian Economic Crisis caused Thailand's economy to crash, followed by Korea, Indonesia, Malaysia and then the rest of Asia (422). However, the region is on its way to recovery with a leading economist recently observing that "Asia is set to become an increasingly important engine of growth in the future even as it leads the world out of the worst recession in over half a century (International Monetary Fund 2010).

If current trends continue, it is estimated that by 2030 the economy of Asia will be "larger than that of the United States and [the] European Union combined" with 40% of the world's GDP coming from this region (International Monetary Fund 2010). This is not to say that poverty in Asia will be eradicated. In fact, even though there has been a "dramatic

reduction in poverty” in this region, “Asia still has the highest number of people in poverty” (International Monetary Fund 2010).

The Asian Challenge

Material poverty may be relative but spiritual poverty is not, since most Asian countries have large percentages of their population who have never heard the name of Jesus. The importance of Asia for the Christian church has to do with the reality that its inhabitants constitute “over 83% of the non-Christians in the world, and over 87% of the unevangelized” (Mandryk 2009:363). In fact, “the least evangelized peoples on earth are predominantly Asian” (363). Jesus’ words about “the poor” being always with us (Mark 14:7) is true for the Christian church in Asia—Christians will always be surrounded by those who are materially, as well as spiritually poor. How are they to go about giving them “the bread from heaven” (John 3:32) so that they may be filled? Notice some of the challenges to the accomplishment of Christian missions in Asia.

Extreme Pluralism and Revival of Traditional Religions

There was a time when mission leaders believed that the “world religions, such as Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism, were about to collapse and disappear under the impact of Christian mission and the process of Westernization” (Oosterwal 1999:46). On the contrary, as a response to modernity and westernization, religions in Asia are experiencing “a powerful revival in the religious sphere” as well as in “economic strength and political power” (46). Unfortunately, this religious revivalism has resulted in “a highly sensitive atmosphere of religious intolerance” in the region (Tan 2000:297). Extreme pluralism occurs when many diverse races and religions collide with “modernity and religious plurality” (297). In such a situation “ethnic identity determines religion” so, for instance, “to be Thai is to be Buddhist” (Prescott 2000:431) and to be Malay is to be Muslim (Tan 2000:299). “If a Malay decided to convert to another religion, that person would lose his or her ethnic identity, but also his or her social, political, and economic privileges” (298).

Modernity and Materialism

Modernity is no longer just a Western phenomenon. It has become a global phenomenon where different Asian societies are at different stages in “a continuum of modernization” (296). Modernization is the commitment by a culture to transform its economy through technological innovation, but an unintended effect is secularization. “According to

Berger's secularization thesis, modernization will eventually result in relativizing of all perspectives, especially religious perspectives. There will be privatization of religious beliefs and a pluralization of ideologies and worldviews" (296, 297). In the wake of secularization comes materialism, which is "one of the greatest dangers to spiritual vitality" for it effectively saps the life out of both Christianity as well as the other living world religions (Prescott 2000:424).

Ethnic Differences and Prejudices

The statement, "you fear what you do not understand" sums up the problems of Asia, where thousands of languages, cultures, and religions can be found. As a result of the differentness of language, culture, and ethnicity there is "fear, prejudice, and suspicion" between various cultural-religious groups (435). Such barriers are very serious and often "make crossing them . . . harder for someone from a geographically near but alienated ethnic group than for someone from a distant group" (425). Perhaps a subset of this obstacle is the restrictions placed on direct evangelism and church planting in many Asian countries. In East Asia alone, more than half of its 17 countries (which represents 80% of the East Asian population) are closed to "missionaries." These "closed" or "restricted countries strictly prohibit direct evangelism and church planting (426).

Nominalism and Syncretistic Christianity

Even though there are millions of Christians in Asia, still the church is plagued by people who are merely Christian in name and have not experienced conversion. Another problem has to do with Christians who "continue with pre-Christian practices and a worldview that is incompatible with the Christian faith" (435). People living in two worlds can hardly be portrayed as Christian in the real sense of the word, nor can such nominal and syncretistic Christians be considered already evangelized.

Religious Intolerance and Persecution

Relating to people of other religions has been "a long-standing issue in Asia" (Tan 2000:296). Recently there has been an upsurge of ethnic violence, which has usually been "divided along religious lines" (296) making Christian witness even more difficult. In fact, some modern thinkers "see the old battle lines of the cold war replaced by new ones shaped by religious forces and ideologies" (Oosterwal 1999:46). In spite of the amazing growth of the church in Asia, "the price for demonstrating faith in Jesus can be very high" and Christians are often "harassed, arrested, and even killed" (Mandryk 2009:364).

The Growth of the Church in Asia

In spite of all these challenges, there has been tremendous progress and growth in the church in Asia. This is remarkable, since much of the growth is taking place in previously unevangelized countries such as China, India, Nepal, Iran, Bangladesh, Cambodia, Vietnam, and North Korea (*Operation World* 2011). “Christianity is the fastest growing religion in Asia, and Christianity grows at a faster rate in Asia than on any other continent. Not only has the Church grown quickly; in many cases, it has grown broadly, expanding into new places where followers of Jesus were few or none until recently” (Mandryk 2009:363). Consider the following information:

1. Christians increased from 22 million (2.3%) in 1900 to 370 million (8.8%) in 2010.
2. Protestants, Independents, and Anglicans increased from 3 million (0.3%) in 1900 to 200 million (4.9%) in 2010.
3. Catholic growth was from 11 million (1.2%) to 142 million (3.4%) in the same period.
4. Evangelicals in Asia, (150 million), number more than any continent except Africa.
5. Asia has the fastest growing evangelical population (33%) than any other region (Asia 2011).

What is it that has caused such growth? What are the common denominators in the presentation of the gospel in Asia that led to such an increase? The diversity and vastness of Asia “defies any sweeping generalizations,” hence there are “no easy answers to the challenges facing” Christian missions in Asia (Tan 2000:295). However, a survey of many mission situations in Asia does provide several common denominators that are important to effectively reaching Asians with the gospel.

Common Denominators in Gospel Presentation

Holism or Holistic Ministry

Holistic ministries refer to “the partnership of social (and sometimes political) action with evangelism” (Hesselgrave 2005:120). It stresses “service to and solidarity with the poor” (Fox 1998). In an attempt to present the gospel as good news to the poor, missionaries, both Western and Asian, have engaged in “diverse social ministries” such as “education, orphanages, health clinics and hospitals, medical assistance, AIDS education, job training, drug rehabilitation, child care facilities and others” (Ma 2007:5). Holism also means offering seekers and new believers answers “not just to eternal questions, but also to very real practical questions” that

arise when becoming a Christian conflicts strongly with their ethnic identity (Prescott 2000:432) such as “‘Whom will I marry?’ ‘Who will be my friends?’ and ‘Where can I bury my dead?’ Death and death rites are particularly serious issues for those from Buddhist and Chinese religious backgrounds” (431). Holism involves issues such as “the relationship with ancestors and finding adequate responses to ancestor worship, particularly when ancestor veneration and/or worship is often not just a religious activity but is also a critical element in the social hierarchy” as well as “fulfilling filial responsibility and determining appropriate Christian behavior at funerals” (432).

Spiritual Warfare and Power Evangelism

“Encounters with witchcraft, spiritism, and demon possession” (Hiebert 2000:163) have made it difficult for missionaries to deny the realities of the Asian spirit world. In a region where “the underlying religiosity . . . is animism” (Ma 2007:5) it has been vitally important to have “a visible, practical demonstration that Jesus . . . is more powerful than the false gods or spirits worshipped or feared by the members of a given . . . people group” (Hesselgrave 2005:176). It is not enough to speak of a Christ who has power to save from sin. In Asia there is a need to demonstrate God’s past, present, and future power to heal and deliver from physical and spiritual bondage.

Liberation and Social Advocacy

Like holism, liberation from oppression and social advocacy are basic concerns of the poor. Many in Asia “equate the biblical notion of salvation from sin with the struggle of poor and oppressed people for justice” (120). Engaging in any form of social advocacy may make some Christians uncomfortable. However, when ministering to a politically and economically oppressed society, relevancy will lead one to consider the issues raised by Isaiah 58. The gospel is a liberating force, and is indeed attractive to oppressed people (Covell 1995:272, 273).

Incarnational Ministry

An incarnational ministry places an emphasis on a “continuation of the mission and ministry of Jesus on earth” (Hesselgrave 2005:145). Incarnational ministry stresses living out the life and ministry of Jesus in the community. The “powerful witness of transformed lives” reinforces the message (170) for an incarnational ministry must demonstrate a “willingness to live in relationship—establishing a physical, emotional and spiritual presence that requires constancy accompanied by predictability” (Roberts 2005).

Bible Story Telling

In traditional oral societies, the use of stories as a teaching methodology is not only appropriate but necessary (Guthrie 2000:104). Hesselgrave calls it “a chronological Bible study” method “that follows the progress of biblical revelation from creation in Genesis to Christ in the Gospels, and from the church in Acts and the Epistles to the consummation in the Apocalypse” (2005:185). Many successful missionaries use this method to present the gospel to Asians.

Whole Family Evangelism

Another common denominator among successful missionaries is a focus on whole family evangelism instead of the extraction of individuals. The family orientation of Asians mitigates against the extraction of individuals (185). In many instances, extraction evangelism has caused a community to be prejudiced against the gospel, not because of the message, but because the approach of mission is seen as destroying respect and cooperation among community members. Inviting an entire family to receive the gospel and aiming at whole groups and clans rather than working for individuals is much more effective in societies that are family-based such as Korea and China (Chua 2009:654).

Contextualization

Contextualization or the “enculturation of the faith” is an attempt to share the gospel by dressing it in “Asian clothes” (Fox 1998). Contextualization may include the utilization of redemptive analogies, contextual theologies, or the use of indigenous music, art, and architecture (Guthrie 2000:105). Contextualization places an emphasis on embodying “in human contexts divine revelation given . . . in Scripture so that people believe and follow Christ, and societies are transformed” (Hiebert 2009:17).

Discipleship

Where the gospel is growing rapidly, it has been noticed that there is an emphasis in the “planting and expansion of local churches” (Ma 2007:5). The gospel mandate is not just preaching the gospel but also “making disciples, and gathering” them “into communities whose members are committed to one another and to God” (Ott, Stauss, and Tennent 2010:98). The growth of the church in Asia has been blessed by a strong emphasis on discipleship, and that discipleship has led to the propagation and multiplication of churches. On the other hand, “a church that does not propagate itself will soon die out” (Hodges 1996:42).

Conclusion

This short article has talked about the strategic importance of Asia for both the world at large and for the universal Church. This region where Christianity was born faces the challenges of societies that are multi-ethnic, multi-cultural, pluralistic, and religiously intolerant. In addition, in recent years there has been a resurgence of Asian religions, societies that face modernity and materialism, ethnic differences and prejudice, nominalism and syncretism, as well as religious intolerance and persecution. It is indeed noteworthy that in spite of the fact that Christianity—to most Asians—was, and still is considered “a foreign religion” that is “very different from their traditional religions” (Ma 2007:1), yet the Christian church is growing in Asia. The above-mentioned common denominators which the Lord has led Christians to use in reaching out to Asians with the gospel suggest some of the best practices in a variety of areas where God’s people can push forward the frontiers of Christian missions in Asia.

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Abner P. Dizon is the Director of Philippine Frontier Missions' Evangelism and Church Planting Institute (ECPI) and holds a Doctor of Missiology degree from the Philippine Christian University in Manila.